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ABSTRACT

This report describes a mentoring program at D'Youville College designed to better meet the learning needs of graduate students in special education. The program began in the 1994-95 academic year with the original purpose of giving students a head start on developing ideas and conducting research for their theses. The program has grown, however, to providing mentoring in other aspects of the profession. The paper briefly explains the history of mentoring and the successful results of the mentoring program. Prior to the program, a student survey found that none of the graduate students in special education had attended or presented at conferences, none had papers accepted for publication or had even submitted papers for publication, none had taken on leadership roles in their chosen field, and none had collaborated with faculty member on a project or in research. After only one semester of the mentoring program, 10 students had presented at national or regional conferences, more than 60 had attended national conferences, 8 students had their work published, and 5 were working on research projects with faculty members. Future objectives such as having students serve as mentors to new students are discussed. (CR)

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IMPROVING THE PREPARATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS: A MODEL MENTORING PROGRAM

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Abstract

In order to better meet the learning needs of graduate students in special education at D'Youville College a mentoring program was begun in the fall of 1994. The program began in the 1994-1995 academic year with three faculty members and approximately fifteen graduate students participating on a regular basis. After only one semester of faculty-student mentoring, thirty-five students were participating in the program and student interest and growth in professional development was obvious. This paper describes the mentoring program for graduate students in special education at D'Youville College. Outcomes of the program are discussed as are future goals of the mentoring program.

IMPROVING THE PREPARATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS: A MODEL MENTORING PROGRAM

I would undertake to be an efficient pupil if it were possible to find an efficient teacher. (Gertrude Stein)

Introduction

In order to better meet the learning needs of graduate students in special education at D'Youville College a mentoring program was begun in the fall of 1994. The original purpose of the program was to give students a head start on developing ideas and conducting research for their thesis, a requirement for all graduate students at the college. The program quickly expanded, however, to provide mentoring in other aspects of the profession as well. After only one semester of faculty-student mentoring, an interest and growth in professional development was obvious. In brief, results of the mentoring program exceeded everyone's expectations. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is three-fold: to briefly explain the history of mentoring, a history which led faculty at D'Youville to see the worth of developing a formal mentoring program for students preparing for a career in special education; to describe the

mentoring program for graduate students in special education at D'Youville; and, to discuss future goals of the mentoring program.

History of Mentoring

Any history of mentoring itself must begin with the historic background of the term *mentor*. This term finds its origins in Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*. In this poem we learn that Mentor was entrusted with the care and guidance of Odysseus' son Telemachus. Telemachus was Odysseus' only son and when Odysseus found it necessary to take up his sword and depart for Trojan shores, it was only fitting that he selected his revered friend Mentor to nurture and guide his son during his absence. Thus, Mentor's task was to serve as a role model, guide, and supportive protector for the young Telemachus. Mentor's role can be seen as one of preparing Telemachus for adulthood and for being able to stand confidently at his father's side and that of other warriors. Mentor, in short, had the awesome task of passing the torch of leadership on to the next generation.

The role of mentor can be found throughout classical literature. The list of great mentors is conceivably endless, as for every great student there was no doubt a great teacher. Thus, we can easily point to Mentor and Telemachus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Alexander, Jesus of Nazareth and the apostles, Lorenzo de Medici and Michelangelo, Hadyn

and Beethoven, Freud and Jung, Joyce and Hemingway, and so on. We can just as easily point to the lasting influence these individuals have had on our civilization.

Mentoring has throughout time been manifested in many forms and in different degrees but it has always been more than a mere physical custodial act. It has all the attributes of symbolic parenthood. A major purpose of mentoring, therefore, is what might be called *generativity*. This is the attempt of the older, wiser, and more experienced leader to pass on the responsibility of leadership to the next generation. In this process the mentor, according to Anderson and Shannon (1988), has five functions, that of teaching, sponsoring, encouraging, counseling, and befriending. The faculty in the Graduate Education Mentoring Program at D'Youville hoped to fulfill these five functions. The majority of the students enrolled in the Graduate Program in Special Education at D'Youville are what we refer to as Track III students, students who have entered the program with degrees in fields other than education. Although these young men and women come to the program with a great deal of dedication and zeal--sometimes more than students entering with a degree in education--they also have a number of gaps in knowledge related to educational practice and legal issues in special education. Course work alone did not seem sufficient to fill these gaps for Track III students or to graduate the kind of

extraordinarily competent professional we hoped all of our students would become, especially when one considers the awesome responsibility entrusted to teachers. This responsibility takes on added meaning when working with children and young adults with disabilities.

A Model Program for Improving the Preparation of Teachers

The mission statement of D'Youville College is strongly emphasized in course work and in college activities. This statement was a catalyst for developing the Graduate Education Mentoring Program. Among other things, the mission statement of the college states that the college honors the spirit of Marguerite d'Youville by "educating students toward being proficient innovative, resourceful, compassionate, and well-informed men/women who pursue lifelong learning... Graduates are responsible members of society and of their professions who recognize the needs of the disadvantaged and demonstrate leadership by initiating or facilitating responsible social change" (D'Youville Graduate Catalog, 1995-1996, p. 7). Thus, faculty in the mentoring program at D'Youville see their role as similar to that of Mentor in passing along the torch of leadership to the next generation. In brief, the mentoring program provides a unique opportunity for faculty and students to develop collegial relationships which will lead to more productive teacher-learner environments and

ultimately to the development of students as responsible members of society and of the profession of education.

The D'Youville College Graduate Education Mentoring Program began in the 1994-1995 academic year with three faculty members and approximately fifteen graduate students participating. By the end of the first semester, another faculty member joined the team and approximately thirty-five graduate students were attending regularly. Both faculty and students participate in the program on a volunteer basis and outside of regularly scheduled times for classes and other college activities. Results were immediate.

Prior to beginning the mentoring program a survey was distributed to students requesting the following information: local, state, or regional conferences which the student had attended; local, state, or regional conferences at which the student had presented; information on leadership roles the student had in some activity related to education; any papers the student had submitted or had accepted for publication; and, information regarding collaborative projects or research with faculty. The response to each of these items was disheartening. None of the students in the graduate special education program had attended or presented at

conferences, none had papers accepted for publication or had even submitted papers for publication, none had taken on leadership roles in their chosen field, none had collaborated with a faculty member on a project or in research. After only one semester of the mentoring program, however, a change in spirit and activity was obvious. Ten students presented at a national or regional conference. Topics presented ranged from collaborative models to teaching strategies for working with students with disabilities. Over sixty students were in attendance at a national conference, eight students had their work published, and five students are currently working on research projects with faculty members. This came about, not as the result of lectures and demands, but as the result of the strong mentor-mentee relationships established between faculty and students, relationships in which faculty mentors helped, as Daloz states, to "clear away obstacles," and in which faculty were "encouraging--always encouraging" (1986, p. 28).

New Directions

As the list of student activities under the guidance and encouragement of faculty began to grow, a number of students quickly distinguished themselves as program leaders and potential future scholars. It occurred to faculty in the mentoring program that a number of students who were currently mentees were more than capable of taking

on the more active and responsible role of serving as mentors to new students. It was decided that, beginning in the 1995-1996 year, eight to ten students would be selected each year on the basis of their leadership qualities and accomplishments to serve as senior mentors to newly enrolled students. In August of 1995, the faculty involved in the mentoring program met to nominate and select students to serve as mentors. Foremost amongst considerations regarding the choice of students was their appreciation for and adherence to the expectations outlined in the D'Youville College Mission Statement. Therefore, students were chosen on the basis of their scholarship, community involvement, and involvement in college activities. Ten students were recognized and honored by being sent a letter acknowledging their accomplishments and inviting them to serve as senior mentors. The role of the senior mentors became a critical factor in insuring the growth and success of the mentoring program.

Although an initial and primary purpose of the program was to foster research skills that would assist students in the scholarly exploration of an area of interest, the program quickly added other goals related to professional development. At the start of the 1995-1996 academic year, the faculty (in conjunction with the mentees) developed goals perceived to be important for professional growth and development.

The senior mentors subsequently developed a calendar of mentor-hosted presentations which took place throughout the academic year. The presentations focused on issues which the mentors believed were of value to newer students. Included in presentations, for example, was information related state certification requirements for special education, to professional development, and to individual areas of interest and expertise. Senior mentors also volunteered to present information related to their own research in special education, to their masters' level thesis, and to their teaching, clinical, or community volunteer experiences. Meetings were held once a month, generally for a one hour period. Although dates and times of meetings were posted throughout classroom buildings, attendance by students in the Graduate Program in Special Education was completely mandatory. News of these presentations spread quickly, however, and meetings were well attended. An important component of mentoring was thus formed. Those who had received guidance became mentors themselves. The torch of leadership continued to be passed on.

A student new to the graduate program in special education in the fall of 1995 describes the mentoring program as follows:

> I was pleased to discover that graduate students in education were supported by a mentoring program... The mentoring program provides a forum for students and faculty to interact and the senior mentors have proven to be an invaluable source of important information... Although professional activities are suggested and discussed as part of normal course work, the mentoring program heavily encourages participation and collaboration in professional and scholarly activity. This has made the classroom environment much less competitive and more friendly, comfortable, and enjoyable (Levine, 1996).

This same student goes on to say that "benefits from participating in the mentoring program are numerous and range from academic to career to personal. [The faculty and senior mentors] have made coming to a new city, a new school, and embarking on a new career much easier."

The words of this student are gratifying. Supporting and nurturing the growth of those who choose to enter the field of teaching is vital to the future of public education. The ultimate reward for this guidance is an outstanding educator with the knowledge, skills, and insight to "not only know *how* to do things, but more importantly, [to] know how to do things *right* (Playko, 1990). by establishing mentor-mentee relationships between

students and faculty at D'Youville, doors are opened to encourage and nurture the tremendous potential of future teachers. doors are opened through which the torch of leadership can be passed on to the next generation.

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